

**American Political Thought (GOVT 420)**  
**George Mason University**  
**Spring 2024**

**Professor Samuel Goldman**

**Email: [sgoldma7@gmu.edu](mailto:sgoldma7@gmu.edu)**

**Course Meeting Day + Time: Wednesdays | 2:00 – 4:30 PM**  
**Location: Van Metre Hall 481**

**Course Description:** The American political tradition is characterized by many paradoxes. For example, how is it that America is ostensibly a secular nation predicated on a strict separation between church and state, and yet its political culture was at the time of the Founding, deeply suffused by religious faith and imagery? How do Americans balance competing values such as liberty and equality, scientific progress and the preservation of tradition, or economic competition and philanthropic charity? Why do Americans cherish privacy, individuality, or civil disobedience on the one hand, even as they extol civic engagement, citizenship, patriotism, and voluntary association, on the other? How can historical injustices of racial exclusion be reconciled with the universal commitments of liberalism? Rather than novel questions, these tensions run more or less continuously from America's founding.

This course seeks to illuminate these enduring puzzles of American political culture by returning to their sources in its earlier political tradition. We will read and discuss writings from several different epochs including the American Revolution, the Founding Era, nineteenth-century critiques of democratic culture, controversies over slavery and race in the years leading up to the Civil War, and the emergence of distinctive liberal and conservative interpretations of the American political tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Grade Breakdown:**

Response 1: 15%

Response 2: 15%

Take home Final: 50%

Participation: 20%

**SCHEDULE**

**Week 1**      The Declaration of Independence

**Week 2**      John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chs. 2-4, 8-9, 19; Jefferson to Madison, 6 September 1789; Madison to Jefferson, 4 February 1790

**Week 3**      Articles of Confederation; Constitution, *Federalist* 1, 10, 14-15, 23, 39-40, 51; *Letter of the Pennsylvania Minority*; Letter of Agrippa IV; Carey

McWilliams, "What the Anti-Federalists Were For"

**Week 4** Amendments; Federalist 55, 57, 63, 84; Jefferson, Letter to Madison 15 March 1789; Federal Farmer 7; Excerpts from Sanford Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution*

Response paper 1 distributed.

**Week 5** Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. 5; Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*; Derek Thompson, "The Religion of Workism is Making Americans Miserable"

Response paper 1 due.

**Week 6** Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* Query 19; Jefferson to Madison, 28 October 1785; Jefferson to John Jay, 23 August 1785; Alexander Hamilton, excerpts from the *Report on Manufactures*, Jefferson to Benjamin Austin, 9 January 1816; Michael Shaffer, "Conservatives are Having an Epic Argument About Capitalism"

Response paper 2 distributed.

**Week 7** Excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Response paper 2 due.

**Week 8** Excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

**Week 9** Locke, *Letter on Toleration*; Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, Query 17; Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance*; George Washington, *Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport*; Yuval Levin, "The Perils of Religious Freedom"

**Week 10** Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 14; Slavery provisions in the U.S. Constitution (Art. 1 Sec. 2, Clause 3; Art. 1, Sec. 9, Clause 1; Art. 4, Sec. 2, Clause 3); Fed. 54; William Lloyd Garrison, "On the Constitution and the Union"; Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July", "The Constitution of the U.S.: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?"

**Week 11** Robert W. Johansen, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, Chs. 1-3, Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address", "Second Inaugural Address"; Douglass, "Address on the Dedication of the Freedmen's Memorial to Abraham Lincoln"

**Week 12** Woodrow Wilson, "What is Progress?"; John Dewey, "The Future of Liberalism"; Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Commonwealth Club Address", State of the Union 1944

**Week 13:** Russell Kirk, "Ten Principles of Conservatism"; Frank Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism"; Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address"

## **Week 14:** Wrap-up and Review

Take-home final distributed. Due in 48 hrs.

### **Academic Integrity**

- *The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. As a Mason student, you should follow these fundamental principles at all times, as noted by the [Honor Code](#): (1) All work submitted should be your own, without the use inappropriate assistance or resources, as defined by the assignment or faculty member; (2) When you use the work, the words, the images, or the ideas of others--including fellow students, online sites or tools, or your own prior creations--you must give full credit through accurate citations; (3) In creating your work, you should not take materials you are not authorized to use, or falsely represent ideas or processes regarding your work. If you are uncertain about the ground rules or ethical expectations regarding the integrity of your work on a particular assignment or exam, you should ask your instructor for clarification. Support for you to complete your work is available; no grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct.*

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- Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email:ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474
- Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email:ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474